

Inadvertent environmentalism and the action-value opportunity: reflections from studies at both ends of the generational spectrum

A recent turn towards a more contextually nuanced apprehension of the challenge of making everyday life less resource hungry has been partly underwritten by widespread evidence that the environmental values people commonly profess to hold do not often translate into correspondingly low impact actions. Yet sometimes the contexts of everyday life can also conspire to make people limit their consumption without ever explicitly connecting this to the environmental agenda. This paper considers this phenomenon with reference to UK studies from both ends of the generational spectrum. The first questioned how older people keep warm at home during winter and the second examined how young people get rid of no longer wanted possessions. Both found that, though the respondents involved were acting in certain ways that may be deemed comparatively low impact, they were hitherto relatively indifferent to the idea of characterising them as such. We outline three ways in which sustainability advocates might respond to the existence of such 'inadvertent environmentalists' and consider how they might inspire studies that generate fresh intervention ideas instead of lingering on the dispiriting recognition that people do not often feel able to act for the environment.

Introduction

This paper emerged from discussions about two UK interview projects. Both were interested in how identified social groups achieve particular mundane objectives and what this suggests about the most effective means of encouraging them to live in less resource consuming ways. The first considered how older people keep warm at home during winter and the second examined the ways in which young people rid themselves of no longer wanted possessions. Both found that, though in certain respects the respondents involved were acting in ways that may be deemed comparatively low impact, they rarely connected these actions to any explicit idea of caring for the environment. The question we ask here is how should advocates of less resource hungry living respond to such situations and how might our finding feed into sustainability research more broadly.

As a means of developing our answer, we explore what we characterise as the ‘action-value opportunity’. A recent move towards a more contextually nuanced apprehension of the challenge of making everyday life less resource intensive has been partly underwritten by the widespread identification of what has been dubbed the ‘value-action gap’. This refers to how the environmental beliefs people often profess to hold seldom seem to translate into correspondingly low impact lifestyles. Our purported ‘values’, it would appear, are often soon overridden by various situational pressures and evolving norms of action that prescribe how we come to live in different social contexts. Yet, as we found in our two studies, the lived experience of identified contexts can also conspire to make people consume less than they otherwise might. Could the gap therefore be easier to close if we invert the imagined causal chain and start with this subset of positive actions instead of the values that appear to have only a limited influence?

We begin with a short overview of how recent studies taking a more contextually nuanced view of the challenge of fostering less resource consuming lifestyles have characterised and examined the lived interplay of environmental values and everyday actions. Then we detail how the respondents in our two studies revealed themselves as ‘inadvertent environmentalists’ in the sense that past experiences and current pressures were encouraging them to live in certain comparatively low impact ways, though without ever connecting this to the environmental agenda in any explicit way. We then outline three ways in which sustainability advocates might respond to such situations. Our conclusion is that the prospect is not as bleak as the ‘value-action gap’ concept tends to imply and that attending to the existence of the inadvertent environmentalist could lead to fresh ideas about the most effective means of encouraging less resource consuming societies.

Questioning the interplay of values and actions in everyday life

One of the most common ways of characterising the challenge of promoting less resource intensive living has traditionally been derived from psychological and economic ways of understanding human action that frequently buy into an

individualised model of action in which behaviour appears as the outcome of mental process, often understood as prior deliberation (see, for useful overviews, Jackson, 2005 or Berthoû, 2013). Framed in this way, the task has often been understood as one of persuading people about the merits of lower impact living in the belief that they should then act accordingly. The human targets often imagined here are 'essentially rational' actors who weigh up the evidence and then decide how best to respond (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002). Two of the most influential applications, for example, are the 'theory of planned behaviour' and the 'theory of reasoned action' (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). Both offer a fundamentally linear model of how various factors combine to influence the ways in which people 'choose' to live (Harrison and Davies, 1998) such that the objective often logically becomes one of encouraging them to adopt an environmental identity or 'worldview' (see Stern and Dietz, 1994). Various subtleties have been incorporated into these models in an attempt to deal with the complexity of real world situations (Jackson, 2005) and identify how messages might be tailored to particular groups (Barr and Gilg, 2006). Yet the central concept generally remains the same – mental processes come first and the core aim is accordingly to find the best means of manipulating them in pursuit of more sustainable societies.

Following some earlier steps in this direction (Owens, 2000; Burgess et al, 2003; Spaargaren, 2003; Shove, 2003), a group of sociologists, geographers and others less inclined to prioritise mental processes in the same way has since begun to coalesce around the suggestion that we should start instead with how social conventions regulate our actions (Shove, 2010; Nye and Hargreaves, 2010). Any environmental ethic by which an individual may otherwise want to live is here understood as liable to be soon obscured by the business of living in ways that have been defined as socially desirable in particular places at particular points in time. Agency has now been transferred from seemingly autonomous individuals to the forces that influence how wider societies come to achieve commonplace objectives in some ways instead of others (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012). Correspondingly the aim is to understand how the contours of what are taken to be 'normal' ways of living evolve and then influencing this process so that future collectives simply find themselves adopting more sustainable practices without the individuals involved

necessarily needing to reflect on what they feel they ought to do (Shove, 2003; Røpke, 2009; Hargreaves, 2011). The more ambitious task is now one of steering cultural change such that societies eventually come to find themselves living in ways that require, for example, less water use in their gardens, rather than persuading people in the here and now about the value of hosepipe bans (Chappells et al. 2011). For some, there is little common ground between this way of defining the problem and the previous accounts that centred on mental process (Shove, 2011). Others argue for combining both (Whitmarsh et al., 2011). Still others (Young and Middlemiss, 2012) suggest choosing carefully since each stance can easily lead to policies researchers might not otherwise endorse (governments can, for example, use individualised models of responsibility to justify doing less themselves).

The move towards the latter, more contextually focussed, approach has been partly underwritten by the widespread identification of a 'value-action gap' (Blake, 1999; Hobson, 2003; Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002; Barr and Gilg, 2006). This refers to the now sizeable volume of evidence suggesting that, despite the fact that many people say they want to live in a more environmentally sensitive manner and believe wider societies should strive to be more sustainable too, they do not often practise what they preach. In other words, and though we must recognise how respondents often want to give the most socially desirable answers, it does still seem to be the case that professed environmental 'values' are seldom strong enough to translate into correspondingly low impact 'actions'. Recent examples include Waitt and Harada's (2011) consideration of how some Australians do not change their driving habits because feelings of comfort and protection inside their cars trump any purported anxieties about climate change. Another is Flynn et al.'s (2009) study of how the British feel incapable of embracing hydrogen energy technologies because the power of local conventions is such that they only feel able to make the most 'convenient' changes. A third is Kennedy et al.'s (2009) examination of Canadians who recognise the value-action gap in their lives and hint at how time pressures prevent them from making more sustainable choices. If the value-action gap exists, as it often appears to, it seems entirely logical to sideline personal values as the target of intervention. If actions are really what we want to change, and purported personal values have only a limited influence over them,

perhaps we need only engage with the broader cultural dynamics that really dictate our actions and forget about the apparent 'barriers' (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002, Lorenzoni et al. 2007) that prevent people from doing what they otherwise would.

Yet, rather than ignore values entirely, our paper starts with the suggestion of inverting the way in which the value-action gap is conceptualised. If the route is blocked when we go in one direction (influencing personal values in the hope that this will lead to environmental actions), could we go the other way? In other words, could existing social contexts that have already proved themselves capable of producing comparatively low impact actions transform the values of those living within them such that they become more widely empowered to take on the sustainability challenge? We characterise this as the 'action-value opportunity'. In developing this suggestion, we see our paper as building on other studies concerned with such 'actually existing sustainabilities' (Krueger and Agyeman, 2005) understood as ways of living that are currently disconnected from environmental agendas despite being otherwise in line with them. Klocker et al. (2012), for example, use this concept to consider the potential energy savings associated with the return of extended family households in Australia whilst recognising how overtly 'sustainable' living will likely be far from the priorities of those living out this trend. We also draw inspiration from the finding that small interventions in the contexts of everyday life have the potential to facilitate a promising blend of environmental actions and feelings. Hobson (2006), for example, discusses how the distribution of simple devices to help reduce domestic resource consumption (such as shower timers which remind us when to get out and energy efficient light bulbs that are easy to fit) seemed capable of both helping people to act for the environment and to feel more positive about their personal capability in this regard. Though more research is needed to be sure, the exciting suggestion here is that this positivity could then spill over into broader beliefs about their ability to be part of the transition to more sustainable societies.

Other recent studies taking a more contextually sensitive approach to the question of how best to make everyday life less resource hungry have shown how low impact lifestyles may result from personal circumstance as much as pre-existing

commitment. Some respondents in Hards' (2012) study of keen environmentalists, for example, revealed how it was only when they arrived at particular points in their lives that they found themselves in a position to take such a stance. We have also seen how those who may value living in resource conserving ways at home (Barr et al. 2011) or at work (Anderson, 2011) can elsewhere (most notably with reference to holidays) find it comparatively easy to put these same commitments aside. Far from being displayed through a consistent demonstration of a coherent 'environmental identity' (on this see Stern, 2010), explicit senses of being an 'environmentally friendly' person would seem to come and go in ways that are not easy to predict and which may often depend on the situation at hand. Complicating the picture further is the recognition that the ethics linked to lower impact living are not all of a piece. Sometimes they relate to being frugal more than acting for the environment (Evans, 2011) since, for example, many 'domestic moralities' (Gibson et al. 2011) may attach themselves to acts of consumption at home (Hall, 2011).

In summary, the spotlight has recently turned from mental process to cultural context in terms of what is understood as the most effective starting point for those who would promote more sustainable living. For some advocates of the latter approach, we need never trouble the values of those whose lifestyles we want to change because personal values have already been dismissed as comparatively impotent in terms of making more sustainable living the norm. Yet some of these contextually focussed studies have also shown how various ethical registers, environmental or otherwise, continue to pop up in everyday life. Developing this less theoretically prescribed approach to the lived interplay of values and actions, and consistent with how both studies took a relatively 'grounded' approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) to the reasons why the people with whom we spoke did things in some ways instead of others, we now illustrate how the respondents in our two studies emerged as 'inadvertent environmentalists'. To be clear, and supporting the argument that it may be the lived experience of identified contexts more than otherwise coherent sets of environmental values that produce more or less resource intensive lifestyles, they did not always fit this characterisation. Both sets were happy to be significant consumers in other aspects of their lives. Yet with

regard to the two activities that were of particular interest to us, it did seem to apply in certain respects we think worthy of further consideration here.

Older people achieving winter warmth: more sensible than sustainable

Interviewer: So do you think of yourself as sustainable?

Respondent: Oh I think I would say I can be practical... Well I wouldn't put the oven on just to warm up a pizza, I'd wait until I'd got something else in.

The first project examined the ways in which older people achieve winter warmth at home, how they had come to adopt these strategies, and the rationales associated with them. It involved serial interviews and photo diaries with twenty-one households with occupants aged over seventy in the UK Midlands. The sample included a mixture of single and dual occupancy homes and a variety of housing types and forms of tenure. It was also stratified so that one half was relatively affluent and the other half was relatively poor (for more on the project see Day and Hitchings, 2009; Day and Hitchings, 2011; Hitchings and Day, 2011). The justification here was that, if any strategies or sentiments were revealed as common across this diversity of households, there would be good reason to think they were more generally widespread amongst this generational cohort. One intention was to see what this exercise would suggest about the best ways of promoting more sustainable domestic energy use to older people today.

Views differ on how easy it should be to encourage older generations to live more sustainably. Some use trends and forecasts to paint a relatively bleak picture of what societal ageing means for future energy demand as ageing baby boomers with significant disposable income refashion our understandings of how later life should be lived (Biggs et al. 2007; Haq et al. 2010). There is also evidence that older people are increasingly choosing to remain in large, energy inefficient houses that require much fuel to heat (Hamza and Gilroy, 2011). Then there are studies indicating how new aspirations for post retirement travel may lead to yet further carbon emissions (Banister and Bowling, 2004). Such studies combine to create a picture of older people as destined to use increasing amounts of energy: they feel entitled to live

comfortably, they often have the financial means to do so, and they increasingly want to make the most of retirement.

Other research, however, could be taken to suggest older people could potentially become effective energy conservation champions. Schor (2004) reminds us that, because of the austerity of earlier phases in their lives, many of today's older people remain keen on economising with a view to ensuring they can cope with any future hardships. This chimes with wider public portrayals of thrifty older people in possession of skills that younger generations could benefit from acquiring in pursuit of environmental objectives (Nicol, 2010). Others suggest older people often want to leave a positive social and environmental legacy behind them as thoughts naturally turn to the bigger picture as the end of life approaches (Moody, 2008; Warburton and Gooch, 2007). Accordingly Haq et al. (2008) make a tentative case for older people being keen to fight climate change, though currently lacking the knowledge and senses of personal agency necessary to act on these feelings. These accounts add up to produce quite a different picture of potentially eager environmentalists – elders who really could 'save the world' (Thomas, 2004).

This contradictory account is partly down to the still limited volume of work on the implications of societal ageing for sustainability agendas (Pillemer and Wagenet, 2008) and partly reflective of the research methods that have been applied so far. In some respects it mirrors our earlier discussion by highlighting how different approaches naturally produce different pictures: if we focus on attitudes the result is a promising account of environmental eagerness, but if we look at trends in what older people are actually doing the prospect suddenly becomes more sobering. With these opposed positions in mind, our study followed the argument that this area of research may benefit from a contextually sensitive examination of how both suggestions might feasibly feature in the detail of what older people currently do. Whilst well aware that things will certainly change as new generations move into older age, the rationale was that this fledgling field might benefit from in-depth research centred on how today's older people meet identified everyday objectives.

So how then did our respondents keep warm at home and how, if at all, was this connected to sustainability agendas? Here what was immediately apparent in our study was how being warm at home was largely understood as non-negotiable. These older people generally felt they needed higher ambient temperatures as a result of physical ageing and any desires to live more sustainably were unlikely to impede them from responding to this. Questions of cost and what temperatures were most healthy were also more pressing than any nascent beliefs about environmental responsibility. Towards the end of our interview visits, we asked whether our respondents connected home heating to energy saving for the environment. The rationale was that to do so any earlier might prevent us from exploring their current winter actions fully and in their own terms. By doing so it became immediately apparent that domestic warmth and environmental issues were not readily connected. Acting for 'the environment' was about energy saving light bulbs or recycling schemes. There was a general and relatively vague desire to contribute to sustainability agendas – but it seldom advanced any further than that and, most interestingly for us, was rarely connected to strategies for achieving domestic warmth.

Yet when we talked earlier about the actions our respondents took to keep warm at home during winter, it was clear that a variety of strategies were often employed to ensure they were personally not too 'wasteful'. In this regard, many seemed to buy into the suggestion that, as one respondent put it, 'this is just what you do' – frequently drawing on ideas of 'common sense' to justify these actions. Though respondents generally felt they should provide themselves with what they 'needed' in terms of health and wellbeing, this was rarely a case of setting the thermostat for the whole house and then leaving it at that. Many were also making hot drinks, wearing extra clothes, sparingly using plug-in heaters, and cooking several meals together so that regular hot food was easier to prepare without too much overall cost. All these strategies sat alongside a spatially varied use of central heating in which it was often deemed, as one respondent put it, just 'silly' to heat the whole house when you didn't spend time in all the rooms. So, although these actions were rarely framed as attempts to be more 'sustainable' and although we saw anxieties

about being perceived as 'mean' to which we will return, our study nevertheless identified various strategies likely to result in less overall energy use.

This approach to dealing with winter cold at home was thrown into sharpest relief when we broached the topic of generational difference. Though our respondents were reticent about attaching themselves to stigmatised caricatures of incapable 'old people' with out-dated approaches to life (Day and Hitchings, 2011), opinions on how their children and other younger people dealt with winter cold at home were sometimes expressed with passion. Suddenly many respondents were eager to endorse the idea of generational distinctiveness. Their feelings here ranged from resignation to scorn, but the central point was that younger people were more wasteful. Curtains provided a good example since younger generations were often taken to lack any appreciation of their real purpose. For several respondents, curtains were understood as valuable aids in ensuring their homes retained the heat with which they were paying to fill them. Yet, from what they observed in the houses of their offspring, younger people thought curtains were about decoration or privacy only. In this regard, it was sometimes deemed 'strange' that younger people 'didn't even realise' their purpose and might even ridicule those older than them for 'worrying about' matters such as the effective use of internal doors to keep heat in certain rooms. Some figured this was because younger bodies were more able to endure cold, but still younger people didn't think about taking such actions or consider the benefits of staying in the warmest rooms. Younger generations had seemingly been socialised into a more self-indulgent approach that left them without the ability or inclination to respond to winter cold through means other than central heating. As some respondents rationalised it, younger people had grown up with it, after all.

The reason why some of these views about the increasing self-indulgence of society, as epitomised by the wasteful home heating of the young, were delivered with some force seemed partly because they had seldom been given voice before. This appeared largely a matter of self-censorship since, as mentioned above, our respondents were eager to distance themselves from a negative stereotype of a frugal older person who was, at best, careful with the heating and, at worst,

strangely self denying in this respect. In this regard, we observed some nervousness about revealing their retention of what one respondent dubbed 'the old mentality about warmth.' At times this manifested itself in a deliberate levity about strategies they personally valued but which, so they seemed to reason, would likely be deemed anachronistic and amusing to a wider society that was headed in an increasingly resource hungry direction. As such, care could be taken to underscore how personal habits of ensuring they always turned the lights off when they left the room or guilty feelings about leaving the heating on when they went out were merely individual foibles. Our respondents believed such actions were out of step with what one tellingly termed the 'modern way' of keeping warm and they wanted to demonstrate themselves as aware, if not always approving, of wider cultural change - hence their reticence about talking with children or others who were comparatively young about these matters. No one wanted to be teased about being too much of a 'granny' or 'grand-dad' in this respect and so our interviews offered a relatively rare opportunity to express privately held convictions about the 'right' ways of keeping warm that were otherwise infrequently articulated.

So, though the idea of living in an overtly 'sustainable' way was not one to which our respondents were particularly wedded, and though they were careful about when and how they were discussed, past experiences were evidently encouraging our respondents to retain certain comparatively low impact ways of living with winter cold at home, even though these were often recognised as out of step with wider cultural norms. To be clear, we are not arguing our respondents were using less energy than others in terms of total amounts. Domestic heating was to be used if needed, many figured they needed more now, and they were often at home more than during earlier phases of their lives. In this sense our respondents were exhibiting aspects of the tension we identified in the literature, with certain features of their generational experience encouraging them to use more heating and others encouraging them to use less. The point we want to take forward, however, is that the contexts through which they had lived were encouraging them to retain certain energy saving ways of dealing with winter cold that were understood as simply the most sensible (or 'practical' as put by the respondent

with which this section starts) choices. They were inadvertent environmentalists in this regard.

Young people doing divestment: more sensitive than sustainable

Interviewer: Why is it important to you that your unwanted things are passed on?

Respondent: 'Cause then it's not waste, in my opinion. 'Cause if it's usable and it's passed on, then it's not waste and someone else can use it.

The second project focused on how the current generation of young people gets rid of unwanted possessions as a means of deepening our understanding of everyday consumption amongst this group. Thirty-two respondents from the South East of England aged 16-19 were interviewed twice, bringing photos of possessions and their most commonly employed divestment channels along to the second meeting. A core objective was to consider what a subtle appreciation of how and why they parted with some items, and why others were retained, would suggest about the most effective means of promoting more sustainable ways of defining and dealing with waste to this group.

Much like older people, young people have been framed as both cause and cure of unsustainable consumption (Collins and Hitchings, 2012). On the one hand, some see young people as intrinsically hedonistic in their pursuit of possessions for status, entertainment and identity construction. This may be rooted in the popular perception that this is simply what teenagers do (Abrams 1959), a view further magnified by the degree to which young audiences are targeted in the promotion of novelty and fashion (Cody 2012; Langer 2005; Chaplin and John 2005). Either way, the resulting picture of relatively self-indulgent consumers has received empirical support from studies of consumer behaviour, with emphasis placed on seemingly insatiable wants, the pressure to keep up with trends, and acquisition for short-term pleasure (Wilska 2003; Autio and Heinonen 2004; Russell and Tyler 2005).

A second body of work is concerned with young people as potential sustainability advocates. These studies are motivated by the suggestion of young people possessing high levels of influence within their social groups, and thus having significant

potential as agents of change within networks of family and friends (Ballantyne et al. 2001, 2006; Bentley et al. 2004; Payne 2005; Uzzell 1999). Accordingly there are now many youth-focused initiatives built on the hope that the sustainable behaviours thereby engendered should then diffuse through these channels. However, while young people may report environmental concern (Connell et al. 1999; Jenkins and Pell 2006; Walker and Loughland 2003), another 'value-action' gap characterised by obstacles ranging from pessimism about personal efficacy to self-confessed laziness regarding the 'inconvenience' of living more sustainably has also been identified amongst this group (Ojala 2007; 2008).

In view of another equivocal account (with some studies presenting young people as the obvious starting point for attempts at fostering lower impact living and others painting them as the cheerleaders of increasingly consumptive societies), the second project also sought to examine how and when each characterisation could be observed in the detail of everyday actions. As with the previous study, 'sustainability' and 'the environment' were only introduced towards the end of the process in order to discourage respondents from presenting an uncharacteristically 'green' self. One key finding related to how, often understood in terms of other priorities altogether, these respondents were divesting and retaining items in ways that could arguably be described as allied with the principles of sustainability, though without particularly attaching these actions to this agenda.

Not unexpectedly, some items were simply 'binned' (placed directly into the waste stream with little thought of the implications). However, more interesting was how giving things away was often cited as the most common way of dispatching no longer wanted possessions. Almost all these young people said they did this 'because someone else can use it' – either by passing things on to family and friends or by donating to charity shops and clothing banks. A smaller group also sold unwanted items via internet auction sites or car boot sales. While these latter methods are not unproblematic in view of the fuel used in the transportation of items, like giving things away, they nonetheless reflected a commitment on the young people's part to preventing things from becoming waste. Here was a shared

sense that to dispose (via the rubbish bin) of possessions that retained some residual value would, in one participant's words, 'feel a bit bad.'

It was difficult to pin down what exactly was meant by feeling 'a bit bad', but further discussion suggested it was largely about senses of gratitude and responsibility. These respondents recognised themselves as lucky to be in possession of objects with value and they felt obliged to pass that value on. This seemed a result of previous socialisation into particular attitudes towards ownership and use. Passing things on within and between families had been a norm for all these respondents whilst growing up, thus emphasising how possessions that had become personally unwanted could still have value that would be appreciated by others. They had also generally been instructed by family members to take care of the things given to them in a way that underscored the continued economic and emotional worth of these things. The result was a widespread consensus captured well by one respondent who said 'I think I've always been brought up with the attitude that everything does have a value.'

Attitudes to money also played a significant part, with decisions about whether to part with something being influenced by the ease with which replacements could be acquired. While some had possessions bought for them by parents, either directly or through personal allowances, others who worked part-time to generate disposable income and those from lower income families weighed up what to buy carefully. However, concerns with not wasting money were by no means limited to those from less affluent backgrounds. Some who enjoyed more comfortable financial circumstances had friends who struggled in this respect. Knowing about this sensitised them to the inequality of access to material things, which then made these respondents more thoughtful about their own acquisition and more generous in sharing and gifting to others. As one respondent said, reflecting on a friend's financial difficulties, 'I've realised that I should put my money towards something more productive, and maybe getting more use out of things is better.' Even those from the most affluent families were sensitive to the potential for wasting money through superfluous acquisition and this was both the result of parents 'teaching' them the value of money and of knowing peers with less available.

A natural corollary of these divestment discussions was conversation about keeping. Here a number of respondents echoed the views of one who emphasised how she 'quite liked keeping.' Understandably items which were especially valued, still in regular use, or characterised by emotional attachment were kept. Yet beyond these there was often a collection of possessions that, in the course of clear outs, were almost dispatched – but ultimately retained. Most commonly, this was about having 'back-ups' available 'just in case' newer equivalents malfunctioned – things respondents were often keen to emphasise that they 'might need' in the future. This generally concerned mobile phones and mp3 players as objects deemed central to participation in teenage life. Some possessions – usually items of clothing – were also kept with the intention of repair or repurposing. While this was primarily about bringing a useful or favourite object back into use, repairing or repurposing resulted in both direct gains - namely the continued use of the object - and indirect benefits, particularly the development of senses of self-efficacy which, as Ojala (2007, 2008) notes, may be crucial in encouraging sustainable behaviours to endure amongst young people.

A kind of 'hedging', too, helped divert possessions away from the waste stream by envisioning future scenarios that legitimised current 'just in case' keeping. Like backing-up, this was often underpinned by social anxieties associated with participation in valued youth cultural practices. Commonly with regard to clothing, retaining items in this way alleviated anxieties about being without the 'right' possessions – even if wearing them again was acknowledged as unlikely. Indeed, so important were certain possessions that ensuring uninterrupted access to the necessary gadgets or garments – even if not the latest in terms of style or functionality – was often a top priority. Although participants sometimes saw the waste avoidance benefits of these practices, this was more about anxiety management than waste minimisation – they were being sensitive to the potential for future social stress more than acting sustainably.

Though these young people talked about feeling distanced from environmental problems or unlikely to have much individual impact in addressing them, as with

the older people, a range of other imperatives were also encouraging them to act in certain, comparatively resource conserving ways. Certainly these participants appreciated the value of possessions to a greater extent than popular views of teenagers have given them credit for, as reflected in their often quite thoughtful strategies of acquisition, divestment and retention. In other aspects of their lives they clearly embraced novelty as a means of demonstrating their enthusiasm for fashion and technological development, and, through this, for 'keeping up' with the perceived demands of youth culture. Yet it was also true that another combination of circumstances had created the conditions in which certain approaches to waste avoidance otherwise aligned with sustainability agendas were flourishing, though without the young people themselves connecting these actions to this idea. This second set of inadvertent environmentalists was rather being sensitive both to the predicament of others with less disposable income and the social anxieties linked to how teenage life required certain possessions.

What to do with the inadvertent environmentalist?

By examining the interplay of values (environmental or otherwise) and actions in the detail of everyday life, the above projects sought a comparatively nuanced appreciation of how these respondents went about achieving winter warmth and getting rid of unwanted possessions. Though in subtly different ways, both sets then revealed themselves as 'inadvertent environmentalists' in the sense that the contexts through which they lived were encouraging them to take actions which sustainability advocates might very well want to encourage, but as a result of other imperatives entirely. The issue we are left with is what to do with this intriguing category of person when the likelihood is that many other social groups, in addition to the older and younger cohorts we studied, will sometimes end up falling into it. As we now describe, this is no easy question and, tacking back to the different ways of defining the problem discussed in our earlier review, answers will likely depend on the orientating framework researchers adopt at the start as much as the empirical material they subsequently extract from the contexts of everyday consumption. Nonetheless, we want to do more than merely note the existence of the 'inadvertent environmentalist' and now offer three possible responses. Each

takes a different view on whether there really is an 'action-value opportunity' here and how those involved should most effectively be engaged with.

1. Ignore values entirely

The first position has much in common with the stance that the personal values and ethical priorities of those whose lifestyles we are hoping to influence may not be the best targets. A better strategy might rather be about recreating the conditions in which lower impact living simply becomes the most sensible option. Our studies could easily be used to advance this position. Just as environmental 'values' may be red herrings for some of those who now take a more contextually sensitive view of the problem, so they were far from the concerns of our respondents when managing their warmth or deciding how to divest. In this respect, our studies could easily be used to make a case for human adaptability. Since the circumstances of their lives had encouraged both sets of respondents to adopt comparatively sustainable practices, we might take this to mean others could be encouraged down similar paths without this being felt to be too onerous. But how to do this? In this first case, exposing people to ways of managing domestic warmth that are about more than central heating might be one way since they may thereafter be inclined to retain some of these strategies. The older people with whom we spoke in our first study were often quite attached to practices that were relatively economical in energy use terms but for reasons that were more about how they had developed certain ways of staying warm than about saving energy for the environment. In the second case, a similar suggestion might be to encourage repurposing or customisation skills to spread more widely amongst young people. Whether this was about avoiding social anxiety, limited finances or the simple enjoyment of the activity, some of these young respondents were doing this already. Exposing others to opportunities to try repurposing might encourage senses of personal efficacy and mean fewer new things are bought. Such strategies may seem fanciful. They also have potentially troubling implications if used to argue for increasing fuel costs or reducing disposable incomes as a means of creating contexts for action in which comparatively profligate choices are prevented. Yet this is perhaps where attention needs to focus if we really want more sustainable ways of living to spread. In any case, in this first scenario there is no 'action-value opportunity' since

values are understood as relatively powerless when faced with the forces of wider social change that are taken to be those that really decide how we end up living.

2. Work with existing ethics

The second suggestion is to engage with values other than those associated with a commitment to the environment. This would be in line with some of the more recent contextually focussed studies that highlight how various value positions may be attached to everyday consumption, and how these are not often about environmentalism. How would this work for our two groups? For the older people, it would be about recognising and valuing the ways in which older people are already deploying certain skills to avoid 'wasteful' heating. A campaign about 'sensible' actions that save money might also be appreciated in view of the current economic recession. Recognising the skills of older people in this regard might also lead to senses of empowerment amongst this group in terms of the positive implications of actions they already take despite feeling they are going against the grain of evolving social norms by doing so. However, any such campaign would need to be careful not to encourage or endorse cutting back on energy consumption to a degree that endangered health. For the younger people, if giving away no-longer wanted possessions reflects broader senses of gratitude and responsibility, and if retaining certain back-ups is about preventing future anxieties more than avoiding the waste stream, perhaps it is best to avoid muddying the waters by imposing a sustainability discourse from which many still feel distanced, even while expressing a degree of environmental concern. Since the moral guide for many of their divestment decisions was more social than environmental, the values to emphasise might be about care for others more than care for the planet. This second strategy may feel a little underhand in terms of smuggling sustainability in, but it could be all the more effective for being alive to the ethical registers associated with how those we hope to influence already value certain everyday actions. In terms of the 'action-value opportunity', there is an opportunity here, but the values we are encouraging are not really environmental.

3. Celebrate hitherto unacknowledged environmentalism

The final suggestion fits the idea of the 'action-value opportunity' most fully since we have now decided on an overt celebration of the comparatively sustainable actions that are currently being taken. One of the reasons many people may say they do not act for the environment is because they believe doing so is difficult in view of how other pressures often get in the way. Yet our studies found that, in some circumstances, and without really thinking about it as such, people are doing it already. So could our inadvertent environmentalists become proud sustainability champions? In our older person study there could be scope for encouraging them to share what were, in fact, certain sustainability skills, though care would need to be taken to avoid stigmatised stereotypes of a generation out of touch with modern times. In the younger person study, they could become more empowered to act for the environment by recognising how they are already doing quite well in certain respects. For both groups, this may be more effective than simply saying they should do more for 'the environment' when doing so could easily make them shut down to the idea because of low commitment levels or feelings of limited agency. For both groups, care would need to be taken to approach them in ways that are not patronising about actions that, for the moment, just seem the most sensible choices. Care will also be required to avoid the immediate rejection of a clumsy yoking together of what hitherto seemed quite distinct objectives. Nonetheless, there could still be promise here in activating environmental values that were previously dormant and disconnected from the rationales underpinning existing actions that are already comparatively low impact.

Conclusion

Building on a recent turn towards a more contextually nuanced apprehension of how best to promote lower impact living, the two studies described in this paper took a relatively grounded approach to how the contexts of lived experience serve to produce particular ways of meeting everyday objectives. We then saw groups from both ends of the generational spectrum reveal themselves as 'inadvertent environmentalists' in the sense that they were taking certain actions that were comparatively low impact, though without ever really thinking of them in these terms. This led us to question how sustainability advocates might respond to this

finding, using the 'action-value opportunity' as a device to help structure the process of drawing out the implications.

Returning to the literature review we presented earlier, some of the more uncompromising visions of how cultural conventions emerge and evolve might immediately reject this notion in view of how personal values have already been branded as insufficiently powerful to effect social change of a magnitude appropriate to the problem. Yet we argue it would be a shame to allow the recognition that professed environmental values do not often translate into environmental actions to mutate into the assumption that commitments to doing the right thing are never part of how people go about their daily lives. Though they were certainly far from avowedly environmental, and though they were certainly not consistently demonstrated across all aspects of their lives, in both our studies we saw such commitments and so there still seemed scope for engaging with them in some way. In highlighting this feature we are not advocating the return to a more 'individualistic' understanding of the problem in which people appear as relatively unfettered by wider social norms and pressures. Rather we want to underscore the potential merit of attending to the subtleties of how particular practices with resource use implications ~~contexts~~ come to be done differently by different social groups. Past experiences and current pressures were evidently shaping what our respondents felt they should do in terms of staying warm at home or getting rid of things. Our point here is that we should not overlook how such varied experiences can be generative of commitments to particular ways of going about everyday life that could quite possibly be harnessed to positive environmental ends.

In conclusion, we do not want to press for any one of our three presented responses since which will be most effective will likely depend on the context at hand. In this respect, we would encourage future researchers to guard against the temptation to generalise from studies of specific social contexts and rather to engage with how these contexts could feasibly be influenced by a whole range of interventions. In our winter warmth study, we find the third option particularly appealing because it directly undermines negative stereotypes to show how older people could help society as much as need its help. In our younger person project,

the second seems most attractive in view of the central role played by peer relationships and existing concerns about others. In this regard, and to reiterate, our conclusion is about attending to the processes through which different groups come to feel certain ways of living are most appropriate and then seeing where this leaves us. We recognise this may seem like an unsatisfactorily evasive finish and so, as a means of taking a more definitive final stand, there are two broader points with which we would end for now. One is about ways of characterising the problem and the other about strategies of response.

The first is that the picture is not as bleak as the 'value-action gap', and the associated downbeat talk of 'barriers' preventing people from doing what they otherwise would, suggests. If we were only to look for them, there are evidently many different ways of navigating everyday life that could be deemed comparatively environmental, even if those involved do not necessarily understand them as such. Trading the 'value-action gap' for the 'action-value opportunity' is a simple conceptual inversion but, by turning things on their head in this way, new possibilities come immediately into view. It may therefore be worth allowing this term, or something similar, a place alongside its more established counterpart if only to remind us how the process need not always go in one direction. There will always be a patchwork of more and less resource consuming ways of achieving any given mundane objective. It's more complex than a simple case of people being unable to do the environmental things they otherwise would and now a matter of influencing the rise and fall of the various ways in which they already live, whether through attempts to activate hitherto dormant environmental values or not.

The second is that being attentive to the potential existence of the inadvertent environmentalist could lead to fresh suggestions about the best means of promoting lower impact living. Broad-brush campaigns about the environmental benefits of energy saving or the ethics of household recycling may be unlikely to excite those who have come to occupy this category. Yet questions of what curtains are for or why keeping things can be a good idea may be another matter entirely. Such topics are less often discussed in the environmental literature but if they are those about which our target groups are comparatively enthused, they should

probably feature more. Future research in this vein would need to take care about how, and indeed whether, conserving resources is introduced as a discussion topic to potential respondents when the aim is to understand why they have come to live in certain ways as much as to evaluate their feelings about the environmental agenda. Yet it also stands to identify new intervention ideas that could be all the more effective for being derived from a subtle appreciation of how living in low impact ways became simply the most sensible thing to do. It may be better to develop this line of enquiry instead of lingering on the relatively dispiriting recognition that it is not always easy to act explicitly for the environment.

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